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ABSTRACT

The motivation for monitoring public affairs and for taking part responsibly in the civic process depends on a person's "civic identity," defined as a sense of kinship with and responsibility toward others in the community. Currently civic education is the province of social studies teachers, but English and language arts teachers could also play an important role in increasing the effectiveness of civic education. The Institute on Writing, Thinking, and Citizenship Education held at Harvard in the summer of 1987 was designed to help participants--teachers and administrators responsible for language arts/English or social studies--develop a multidiscplinary approach to civic education at all grade levels, with reading and writing skills at its core. School literature programs can also contribute to the development of civic identity in subtle but profound ways, such as helping develop students' aesthetic and moral sensitivities, and providing them with common cultural information. This use of literature to learn history and civic pride was at one time common in schools, but today's emphasis is on offering exposure to a wide variety of fiction representing various ethnic and racial groups. Thematic units in literature for the secondary school student could focus on perceptions of the community by using fiction that calls attention to the different ways in which communities are portrayed in literature. (NKA)

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Literature and the Development of Civic Consciousness: Questions from the 1987 Institute on Writing, Thinking, and Citizenship Education

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Preparation for citizenship has always been a central purpose of the public schools. Yet, their civic core is so obscure today that many parents and educators believe their major function is to prepare students for higher education or the work force. This perception may result to some extent from the fact that the development of citizenship has been formalized in the public school curriculum as civic, or citizenship, education and designated as the central aim of only the social studies curriculum. Civic education has been the official responsibility of the social studies since the second decade of this century and is most visible in civics courses or in courses on problems of American democracy. Moreover, as we all know, it has always been the explicit rationale for courses in United States history. But citizenship was not intended

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originally as the sole responsibility of history or civics teachers. In fact, its formal isolation within one area of the curriculum may be an important reason for the ineffectiveness of current approaches to citizenship education, a situation that many prominent social studies educators have acknowledged.[1]

Students need more than the knowledge, attitudes, and values that their social studies may provide. They need language and literacy skills for active citizenship, and teaching students these skills is as much a responsibility of English and language arts teachers as it is of social studies teachers, if not more so. But there is something that is perhaps more fundamental than learning what our rights and responsibilities are and how to take part actively in the civic process. That something is motivation. Students need to care about public affairs and want to participate in the process of self-government in some way, for ours is a "civic" culture that depends for its survival upon voluntary participation in the civic process in different ways and at all levels of government, but especially in local government, the training ground for democratic values. The motivation for monitoring public affairs and for taking part responsibly in the civic process depends upon what I will call civic identity. And, as this essay argues, teachers of English and the language arts may have as important a role to play in developing civic identity as social studies teachers.

What is civic identity? It is the psychological foundation for participation in the political process as a "citizen," as someone with a sense of the common good as well as a sense of one's own interests. Civic identity includes more than a sense of belonging to a particular civic entity that can be defined by specific political principles and processes. It is also a sense of kinship with all those who live within the boundaries of that political entity, regardless of economic, intellectual, ethnic, or religious differences. Civic identity transcends individual or group differences, permitting individuals or

groups of individuals to consider the well-being of the whole civic community. It undergirds such acts of citizenship as serving on juries, paying taxes, serving in the military, or voting. It also motivates myriad forms of public service, many of which are essential for local self-government. Without a civic identity, political participation may be little more than self-serving, manipulative, or cynical. Without a civic identity, there can be no self-interest or group interest "rightly understood." Without a civic identity, there is no way to transcend self-interest for the sake of a common good. Students today require a civic education even more than a political education so that their political activities, now and in the future, are informed by a civic framework and a civic perspective.

Unfortunately, we seem to know very little about how civic identity develops. We have, I believe, taken its development very much for granted in the past. Yet, the number of citizens who try to evade jury duty, the decline in voting in national elections and in many local communities, and the large number of citizens who try to avoid paying taxes or who do not wish to support adequately local institutions like public schools and libraries only begin to suggest the dimensions of the problem. The need to develop a positive civic identity and the motivation for responsible, active citizenship is perhaps more urgent today than it has been for many decades, given the extraordinary multi-ethnic nature of our school population and the lack of democratic political traditions in many students' cultural backgrounds. It is reasonable to suppose that civic identity develops from shared experiences, values, and goals. How the public schools can provide these shared experiences, values, and goals today is a major challenge to educators. And the challenge must be met in all disciplines.

The Institute on Writing, Thinking, and Citizenship Education, held at the Harvard Graduate School of Education this past summer and sponsored by the Lin-

coln and Therese Filene Foundation, was designed to address these concerns. Its purpose was to help participants--administrators and teachers responsible for English/language arts or social studies--in develop a multidisciplinary approach to civic education at all grade levels, with reading and writing skills at its core. Writing, especially, was suggested as a basic skill for citizenship because it can be used for developing critical thinking and effective speaking as well as for participating directly in civic or political affairs. However, school literature programs also contribute to civic education. The purpose of this essay is to suggest the subtle ways in which school literature programs may affect the development of civic identity and to indicate some of the thought-provoking questions, discussed by speakers and participants at the Institute, that need to be explored by all those interested in revitalizing civic education and in developing civic-minded citizens.

A school's literature program can serve many purposes. Above all, it helps to develop students' aesthetic and moral sensibilities. It can also provide them with common cultural information, as E.D. Hirsch, Jr. suggests in his most recent book, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know.[2] In it, he urges educators to establish a corpus of literary works that would give all students the basic cultural knowledge that only some now acquire. Hirsch believes that exposure to a selected core of literary classics would also facilitate a better understanding of other works of literature, a claim that is strongly supported by a large body of reading research highlighting the importance of background information for reading comprehension.

While some English teachers are legitimately concerned about possible restrictions on their professional prerogatives in their own classrooms and the narrowing of choices for a wide range of student abilities and tastes, a strong case for some commonalities in literature programs can be made on cultural

grounds. An even stronger case can be made on civic grounds. The reading of a literature relating to a country's history, especially its historical myths, legends, and epic poems, does more than provide a shared language of allusions and metaphors. It also gives students a common historical past with a common set of folk heroes and heroines. These shared reading experiences undoubtedly help foster a sense of civic kinship to others and an interest in the well-being of the civic entity they share.

Literature programs in the public schools once contributed consciously and considerably to this end. A major task facing this country in the early days of the republic was the building of a national identity. Most Americans at that time had much stronger identities with their local or state governments than with their new national government, a situation that continued until well after the Civil War for many. Many citizens of this new country did not want their school curriculum to be simply an imitation of a British or European one. Moreover, as Alexis de Tocqueville points out in his study of America in the first decades of the nineteenth century, they were proud of what the American Revolution had accomplished. Thus, as Ruth Windhover reports in an article in the English Journal,[3] school readers began to offer more literature composed by Americans and, between 1820 and 1840 especially, featured selections lauding the virtues of the new Republic. Towards the middle of the century, speeches by great public orators, particularly those of Daniel Webster, appeared frequently in school readers. Webster's speeches addressed issues like the preservation of the Union and reminded students about what the Revolution had been fought for and their responsibilities towards their country. During the last half of the century, Windhover suggests, literary study came to be seen more explicitly as a way to develop such cultural and civic values as self-reliance, a willingness to work hard, and the need to obey moral and civil law. Elementary school reading series, an outgrowth of older school readers which had

stressed elocution, or public oratory, featured selections emphasizing early American history as well as poems and speeches praising this country's achievements and urging a commitment to its principles.

In the twentieth century, however, the use of literature to teach American history or to develop positive feelings towards this country declined considerably in the elementary school. According to Diane Ravitch' research on the teaching of history, reported in The American Scholar,[4] history in the primary grades was taught mainly through stories, biographies, legends, and folktales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But a new curriculum, called the "expanding environments" curriculum, was developed in the 1930s, and the historical part of the social studies curriculum was dropped and replaced by a sociological and economic emphasis on home, school, and community. Apparently, in the early grades, the use of literature in the social studies for developing a common historical past was abandoned a long time ago.

Charlotte Iiams' dissertation research on basal reading series from 1900 to 1970[5] found not only a decline in stories about American history but also a decline in stories that expressed, as she put it, "pride in the American nation." In recent readers she found little mention of any national holiday except the Fourth of July. Even non-historical civic content diminished. Today, according to Iiams' research, stories about children that are meant to emphasize good citizenship usually depict right conduct in everyday life, not activities on behalf of a civic community. Moreover, few stories suggest the workings of government--people paying taxes, serving on juries, voting, or becoming citizens--or show public servants other than policemen or firefighters. On the other hand, while elementary readers now contain stories about a variety of ethnic or racial groups--an important part of American history that previously had been badly neglected--children or adults in these ethnic communities are rarely active in their civic communities or interact with others for the benefit of a

civic community, at least in the series Iiams examined.

In light of this research, one might ask the following questions. How many tales and legends about American history are American children apt to read in their school literature programs now? How much civic content is in this literature? Do they read biographies of good citizens who benefit their civic community? Does local or state government exist at all in this literature? Do children or adults in the literature they read participate in any way in civic affairs? Do any of the characters engage in civic speaking or writing in civic communities outside or inside the school? For example, in The Pushcart War, a humorous tale of an imaginary war between pushcarts and trucks in New York City, elementary school children write letters to the editor of the city newspaper to defend the rights of pushcart owners. In Maggie Marmelstein for President, children engage in the different kinds of writing that are part of running for an elective office. But how many stories like this are students apt to read? In general, there are two basic questions for elementary and middle school teachers to explore: (1) How much does the literature their students read contribute to their civic sensibilities? and (2) How much does it develop their understanding of the positive elements in American history?

Questions about the literature high school students read may include those that can be asked about elementary and middle school literature programs but go far beyond them in complexity and depth. Literature programs at the secondary level have changed dramatically in recent decades and now offer students a wide exposure to the works of writers from various ethnic and racial groups in this country. Whether we maintain this variety, or reduce it somewhat to offer a core of literary classics, as suggested by Hirsch, or to emphasize the great works in Western Civilization, as suggested by Mortimer Adler in The Paedeia Proposal,[6] the basic question is how the literature our students read at the secondary level contributes to their image of this country and their identity

with it. From a civic perspective, the shared reading of a selected body of literature may not be as crucial as what specifically students read and on intellectual trends within a cultural tradition.

At the end of Chapter I in Jeffersonianism and the American Novel,[7] Howard Mumford Jones asks whether our literary tradition itself has created a negative attitude towards this country and hindered the Jeffersonian philosophy that ordinary people are capable of governing themselves wisely. Jones proposes that we explore such questions as whether "American novelists have been for or against the American state," "what picture they give the American of the American as citizen," and whether "they believe... in moral principle as the founding fathers did."

These questions can be related directly to the English curriculum. English teachers might analyze the kinds of communities their students find in the literature they read and the major characters' reactions or relationships to these communities. For example, are the communities or the "worlds" in which the protagonists live always antagonistic, alienating, or even contemptible, as in The Scarlet Letter? Are central conflicts always between individuals and their communities, as in Main Street? Do protagonists tend to be indifferent to their communities, uncommitted, and in search only of their personal identities? The young reader probably reacts very differently to the community in a Laura Ingalls Wilder book and to the one in The Catcher in the Rye.

From the perspective of civic education, we would first ask whether, given whatever literature they now read in their English classes, students experience some balance between hostile and accepting or learning communities so that a positive sense of community in general is still possible. We would then ask whether the literature they now read in any way fosters a commitment to the basic political principles underlying our lives in civic communities in this country. Can they end up seeing the society in which they live as essentially

decent or potentially salvageable despite its many flaws and failings? Or are they apt to feel implicitly if not explicitly that the exercise of civic virtues is unworthy of their efforts or a waste of time?

A paper given at the Institute by Barbara Beierl[8] outlines several thematic units in literature for the secondary level that focus on perceptions of community, or the community as major theme in literature. For one unit, students might read works in which they treat the community as main subject; individual works might portray differences between virtuous communities, such as in Pilgrim's Progress, and morally reprehensible communities, such as in Lord of the Flies; or they might depict different types of communities, such as civic, religious, and ethnic communities, or local, regional, and national communities. Another unit might examine the nature of the community as support system for the protagonist; individual works might show protagonists in harmony with their community, such as in Pride and Prejudice, without any community, as in Waiting for Godot, or separated from their community, sometimes with positive effects, as in A Doll's House, or sometimes with negative effects, as in Heart of Darkness. Finally, a third unit might deal with pathological communities and include works dealing with the ill effects of industrialization, class differences, racial prejudice, mistreatment of women, children, or animals, or political problems leading to dissent or rebellion. The basic purpose of such units would be to call students' attention to the different ways in which communities are portrayed in literature and to raise their consciousness of community, especially a civic community.

The literature students read or listen to shapes their moral and civic sensibilities in subtle but profound ways, and we need to explore its effects more closely. Literature can be a form of civic writing in direct ways, as in Gulliver's Travels. But it is also a form of civic writing in indirect and possibly more powerful ways. Although such works as Thornton Wilder's Our Town and

Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River Anthology present positive images of community, we have a long, rich, and honorable tradition of dissent and even "muckraking" in our literature. The cumulative effect of this tradition on our sense of the worth of our society may not, as Jones feared, be conducive to the development of respect for the American experiment in self-government or faith in its basic and enduring decency.

One English teacher I talked with recently has found a way to help her students see worth in the larger community that exists as background to any work of art, even when it is barely present in the work itself. This teacher mentioned that, in her discussions of Of Mice and Men with her students, she always asked them to think about the treatment of the mentally retarded in the novel and how treatment of the mentally retarded had changed since Steinbeck wrote his novel. A vision of a progressive society was still possible for her students, despite the events in the novel.

Civic education occurs wittingly or unwittingly in other areas of the curriculum besides the one area in which it is officially isolated. English teachers can make a powerful contribution to civic education beyond helping students master the speaking and writing skills which are so central to effective participation in a democracy. But we do not know whether their literature programs facilitate or hinder the development of the civic-minded citizen that Thomas Jefferson saw as the fruit of universal, free public schooling.

Endnotes

[1]James Shaver, "Reflections on Citizenship Education and Traditional Social Studies Programs." Georgia Social Science Journal 17 (Fall 1986): 1-15.

[2]E.D. Hirsch, Jr, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know

(Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

[3]Ruth Windhover, "Literature in the Nineteenth Century." English Journal 69 (April 1979): 28-33.

[4]Diane Ravitch, "Tot Sociology: Or What Happened to History in the Grade Schools." The American Scholar 56 (Summer 1987): 343-354.

[5]Charlotte Iiams, "Civic Attitudes Reflected in Selected Basal Readers for Grades One Through Six Used in the United States from 1900-1970." Unpublished dissertation, University of Idaho, 1980.

[6]Mortimer Adler, The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982).

[7]Howard Mumford Jones, Jeffersonianism and the American novel. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1966).

[8]Barbara Beierl. "Thematic Units in Literature: Perceptions of Community." Paper presented at the 1987 Institute on Writing, Thinking, and Citizenship Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, July 1987.